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ABSTRACT

Study abroad is not a frill of the foreign language major's curriculum, but rather a component that is crucial to the linguistic preparation of a successful language teacher. During the study abroad experience, the student can obtain the ability to use the language freely and spontaneously, thus helping create an atmosphere of excitement and challenge, a climate frequently missing in foreign language classrooms. Study abroad as it has been traditionally defined for undergraduate foreign language majors and for current teachers on the graduate level must be radically restructured toward an intensive and disciplined language experience. The study abroad experience should be a rigorous program of structured field work in which students spend more time actively using the language with native speakers, than attending passively-oriented, classes and should dramatically facilitate the development of oral language fluency. However, direct government subsidy is needed to facilitate foreign residence as a regular component of language teacher training. The language teaching profession must pursue this financial assistance as a priority in improving foreign language instruction in America. (MSE)

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STUDY ABROAD FOR LANGUAGE MAJORS AND TEACHERS

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A decade ago John Carroll reminded us that we were going nowhere fast in our foreign language teacher training efforts. His highly acclaimed investigation of foreign language proficiency attained by college language majors revealed that "The median graduate with a foreign language major can speak and comprehend the language only at about an FSI (Foreign Service Institute) rating of '2+', that is, somewhere between a 'limited working proficiency and a minimum professional proficiency.'"[1] The results took many by surprise. The profession was emphasizing improved and more efficient instructional strategies while teachers' language mastery was being taken for granted.

A few years later almost 10,000 teachers who attended NDEA Institutes were tested via the same MLA Proficiency Tests which Carroll used. Their averages were even lower than those of the foreign language majors tested by Carroll.[2]

What is the situation like today? If Carroll's study were replicated, would its results be much different than they were ten years ago? Probably not, for we have doggedly gone on with essentially the same kind of language training program that failed to meet the test with Carroll's subjects--a sad indictment indeed. One is tempted to say, if you want to learn a foreign language, don't go to college to do it.

One of the most potent variables Carroll found for increasing language proficiency was time spent abroad.[3] Students with overseas experience scored higher in oral skills than those without it. Especially significant were the proficiency levels of those who had one year abroad. It is encouraging to see that numbers of Americans in study abroad programs have been on the increase. Latest figures available by the Institute of International Education show that 6,347 Americans studied languages and literature in France, Germany, Spain and Latin America in the 1971-72 academic year[4] compared to 2,798 in 1964[5] when Carroll did his investigation. The number of foreign language majors among these totals, however, is not known. The question remains if colleges and universities have taken the implications of Carroll's study seriously enough to make study abroad a part of the language major's curriculum, perhaps even a required part.

An examination of program descriptors in college catalogues reveals that study abroad for language majors has not become a curricular requirement in many institutions. Undoubtedly a number of reasons have influenced this decision, the greatest perhaps being the unwillingness of foreign language departments to place

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more stringent requirements on a shrinking student population. This is well understood, where competition for students exists between language departments which are expected to justify their operations and teaching staffs to a considerable degree by numbers of student enrollees, including majors. This is all lamentable when one considers that language majors by and large are future teachers, and that the classroom environment is extremely limited in giving them the fluency they need. According to Edgerton, it is a "naive conviction among Americans that foreign languages--or anything else, for that matter--can be learned satisfactorily in courses in school with no additional investment of time and energy on the learner's part."[6] The Northeast Conference stated that "The combination of school and college experiences which transform a monolingual youngster into a teacher of foreign language is such that only in a few miraculous cases can the result be a fully qualified teacher.[7]

Certainly opportunities exist outside of class for language skill development within the student's own country; however, they are not readily available to all, and oftentimes they provide for a very minimum of language exposure (e.g., occasional contact with a foreign family residing in one's community). In contrast, an overseas experience, if built into a student's college curriculum, is an ideal means for maximum language exposure. Of extreme importance, however, are the directions this language exposure should take. Students do generally increase their speaking skill through residence abroad. Language majors among Carroll's sample attained roughly one Foreign Service Institute rating level above those who did not have overseas study.[8] But the competency level reached (approximately 3--minimum professional proficiency for German and Spanish students, slightly less for French majors) may not be satisfacoty either as a standard for teacher proficiency or simply as a product for an entire year abroad. Length of program, then, must be viewed in the context of the program content abroad.

Gaarder,[9] in reference to an overseas experience for teachers, would take steps to insure a high level of language skill development (Foreign Service Institute Level 4--full professional proficiency[10]) through a no-nonsense program which is first of all required, and then, intensive and disciplined. The last two descriptors underscore the need for programming which has participants speaking the language a good part (if not most) of the day. We have known for a long time that being abroad in itself has no particular advantage unless it is carefully programmed to take into account the unique linguistic opportunities offered by the foreign setting. If the program centers primarily around students taking formal course work (which for the most part they can just as easily get at home), there is no guarantee that much language skill will be acquired. Taking courses tends to be a passive activity, that is, little effort is exerted to make immediate productive application of knowledge absorbed. According to Weinstein,[11] students expect to play a

passive role in formal course work. In contrast, he cites the Morman student who is preparing for overseas missionary work, a situation in which the student assumes a totally active role as he approaches his language learning. Here the student knows he must function actively in the language, he knows the kind of language he will have to use, and he puts himself to the task of preparing for that role.

It is of course the unusual student who comes to our classes with the kind of language motivation of the missionary-minded student. Nevertheless, there are some steps can take in language courses abroad to increase active language learning. Luce[12] would send the student out on interaction assignments in accord with the student's individual interests. She gives the example of a language course in which the student might be interested in trout fishing and thus be assigned to find out how to go about getting a license, when and where to fish, equipment used and where it is acquired, camping facilities, and the like. "The activity involves role-playing at its best. Questions are asked even if the student already knows the answer, since the goal of the project is to engage the second party in conversation."[15]

Stockle discusses similar active participation in language use abroad in which "the student actually goes out to talk to merchants, to people in their apartments, to people in classrooms--to all levels and types of society."[14]

Kalivoda[15] suggests a structured plan of field experiences in which students are given assignments to interview acquaintances among the local population (e.g., native speaking students with whom they live) on different aspects of the culture. Specific topics are identified and guidelines are provided, including vocabulary and grammar to be learned. Students return periodically to seminar sessions in which they share their findings in the second language. For example, the topic of courtship and marriage might be pursued and reported on via an interview instrument containing questions as some of the following: (1) How are marriage negotiations made? (2) What types of symbols (rings, etc.) are used for the engagement and for the marriage? (3) What kinds of special activities (showers, bachelor dinners, etc.) are commonly held in honor of the engaged couple, and what takes place during these activities? (4) What takes place during the wedding ceremony? (5) Is there a gathering of guests after the ceremony, and if so, what is it like and where is it held? (6) What verbal expressions are commonly used to congratulate are commonly used to congratulate the couple? (7) What accompanying actions are appropriate (e.g., handshaking, hugging, kissing), and are these different for male and female guests, and for the bride and groom? Extended conversation will normally ensue on each issue, because questions and answers will elicit a number of related matters to talk about.

Students must be warned, of course, about the limitations of their sparse and unscientific collection of data for making cultural generalizations. The major purpose of the assignment, however--to involve students in real communication--will have been accomplished. The cultural topics complement the language objective by providing content with motivational appeal.

The idea of periodic re-grouping of students as a supplement to field experiences merits further comment, for applied language practice outside of class traditionally has supplemented daily class sessions rather than the other way around. Are we so naive as to regard a few hours of artificial classroom practice more valuable than intensive applied use of the language with native speakers in its natural setting? Field experiences abroad, when given a degree of structure and control, require a great deal of time of the student. On each assigned topic the student is out interviewing several people a day. Why not accept this provision for language skill acquisition in lieu of daily class meetings? An occasional (twice-a-week?) seminar, to check on language progress resulting from field assignments and to explain grammatical and lexical problems might be more practical than traditional class schedules? What is important is that students are getting intensive practice and are developing a fluency in no way equaled by formal class meetings.

The Study Abroad Program for high school students sponsored by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in Arcachon, France, was built around the above-mentioned philosophy. "Why.... export the artificial language climate of the American classroom to the foreign setting?"[16] ACTFL appropriately asked. Instead, the Arcachon program emphasized extensive interaction and communication with students of the host community, an objective which was accomplished by engaging French lycée students as group conversation leaders and then by arranging for the French and American students to live together and to jointly participate in daily activities (entertainment, eating, etc.). Formal class sessions were held, but they supplemented the field experiences rather than constituted the major part of the program.

Unfortunately, a field experience orientation among programs abroad is not common. For some, it smacks of non-intellectualism and thus not worthy of college credit (although the results outstrip those of traditional course work). For others, it is just too much work. It is far easier to teach a program of daily course offerings than to deal with the detail of field work. Such may have been the rationale behind programs in Mexico and Spain analyzed for their content and effectiveness under the auspices of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. Among the 141 programs reported in the preliminary report,[17] few were structured to insure active language involvement between students and local residents.[18] Those programs which did provide such contact were highly praised by their evaluators. For example, two,[19] in addition to their regular course offerings, sent their students into the city for language contact and hence were earmarked as being highly effective. "Each student not only talked a great deal with local people, but he learned about the activities, customs, and attitudes of Mexicans of the area, and he had to write a daily report on what he had done."[20]

A second and final report involving the evaluation of forty-four other programs in Mexico and Spain done under the same auspices showed only one program which included assigned field experiences and which put each of its students in communicative situations with native speakers.[21]

It is easier to give students classes abroad and then let them speak with local residents on their own initiative. But this is far from disciplined and intensive language learning as Gaarder[22] recommended. Not all students are out-going to seek communicative opportunities with native speaking members of the community, and every student would welcome direction on what to talk about. On the other hand, when left on their own, students tend to spend an inordinate amount of time congregating with fellow countrymen, which results in a great deal of talking in the native language.

With today's emphasis on communicative competence in language teaching, a direction which requires of the teacher extensive vocabulary and skill in using the language in spontaneous fashion, it seems axiomatic that language majors be placed in situations overseas whereby they learn to function in the language in like manner which they hope to help their students at home to do. One reason why students do not learn to speak spontaneously in the foreign language is because their teachers cannot do so. Of course other factors play a supporting role in functional language learning. We know, for example, that instructors who are native speakers of the language they teach are often among the least effective when lacking proper direction in methodology and techniques. But the teacher who lacks oral competence, and who is unable to seize opportunities for foreign language talk and teaching in spontaneously-arising situations, is likely to end up with a rather humdrum lesson. A high level of oral proficiency permits the teacher to project personality and dynamism int o the classroom. Lack of it compounds the difficulty of learning a foreign language because it fails to create an air of classroom excitement as well as a utilitarian purpose vis à vis students' reasons for taking the course in the first place--to gain functional speaking ability. For the teacher who lacks this functional skill, although trained in methodology, the whole idea of teaching for communicative competence which is being stressed in professional circles indeed seems impractical.

One of the problems recognized in generalizing on study abroad is that some students, because of unusual experiences (e.g., prior residence abroad, exceptional contact with native speakers at home, etc.), may not need the foreign experience in terms of language skill development. A proficiency test could be administered to such students to determine their exemption from the overseas program component. Of course they would be missing valuable cultural learning by staying home and hence run the risk of suffering serious limitations as teachers transmitting the foreign culture in the classroom.

Other circumstances may arise which complicate enrollment in an overseas program. A married coed may not be able to participate because of maternal responsibilities. It seems wise to handle such minority cases individually rather than allow them to deter study abroad as a regular program component for the vast majority of language majors. But regardless of isolated cases which will arise, the foreign language department must establish a program orientation in which high professional standards are expected among its majors, thus attracting the more serious minded students and weeding out those who often select a major without any real zeal and commitment to it.

Perhaps a more pressing problem which affects the overall population of majors is finances. Although study abroad still remains a bargain in some places, its costs (e.g., transportation, living expenses) are continually on the rise and tend to limit a foreign residence to the affluent. The Pennsylvania Modern Language Teachers Association, in putting study abroad high on its list of priorities for certifying foreign language teachers, recognized the cost factor by recommending that "The State shall grant an interest-free loan for two-thirds of the cost...this loan to be excused after the teacher completes five years of teaching in the Pennsylvania public schools."[23] Biekhoff[24] suggested a similar proposal on a national level with federal sponsorship. In the interest of fairness, it is essential that some kind of plan be instituted so that foreign language teachers are not burdened with the extra costs required by foreign study. Teachers' salaries are hardly of such proportions to justify their use in defraying study abroad expenses. Government officials on the state and federal levels must come grips with this reality as they take steps to improve foreign language teacher qualifications. State and national foreign language associations can be instrumental and must direct their resources towards calling attention to this need.

A preliminary step for this task would be to establish the level of oral proficiency expected of teachers as per some evaluation instrument, and then to determine length of time needed abroad to meet this standard. It would be interesting to see if a summer program characterized by rigorous requirements for active language use as in the spirit of this paper would do the job. A summer program would be ideal because it would allow for a concentrated offering of language and culture courses, which would leave literature instruction to be done on the home campus.

In summary, study abroad is not a frill of the foreign language major's curriculum but a component which is crucial to his linguistic preparation as a successful teacher. On this experience hinges the ability to use the language freely and spontaneously and hence to help create an atmosphere of excitement and challenge, a climate all too frequently missing in foreign language classrooms.

Secondly, study abroad as it has been traditionally defined and functioning for foreign language majors on the undergraduate level and for current teachers on the graduate level must be radically re-structured toward intensive and disciplined language experiences. A rigorous program of structured field work in which students spend more time in active language use with native speakers than in attending passively oriented classes should dramatically facilitate the development of oral language fluency.

Finally, government action in helping to train foreign language teachers has been absent in America long enough. Foreign language instruction, often because of teacher's language deficiencies, has been relegated too often to passive learning or at best to book talk consisting of practice in contrived situations. If students are to learn to function productively in real foreign language communication they must have teachers who themselves are spontaneously fluent. Numbers of qualified teachers, however, will remain only minimal without direct government subsidy in facilitating foreign residence as a regular component of teacher training. It rests with the foreign language profession to vigorously pursue this financial assistance as one of its priority efforts to improve foreign language instruction in America.

NOTES

[1] John B. Carroll, Foreign Language Attainments of Language Majors in the Senior Year: A Survey Conducted in U.S. Colleges and Universities. U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Contract OE-4-14-048, 1967, ED 013343, 200.

[2] J. W. Dodge (ed.), Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1971, 32.

[3] Carroll.

[4] Institute of International Education, Open Doors, 1973.

[5] Institute of International Education, Open Doors, 1964.

[6] Mills F. Edgerton, Jr., "The Foreign Language Teacher's Predicament," Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin, 4, (March, 1973), 8.

[7] Dodge.

[8] Carroll, p. 138.

[9] A. Bruce Gaarder, "Elitism, Teacher Training, and Other Forbidden Topics," Modern Language Journal, 60 (April, 1976), 154.

[10] The highest FSI level is 5-native or bilingual proficiency.

[11] Allen Weinstein, "Foreign Language Majors: The Washington Perspective," Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin, 6 (May, 1975), 24.

[12] Louise Fiber Luce, "Innocents Abroad: Foreign Language Learning and Use of the Overseas Community," Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin, 7 (May, 1976), 36-38.

[13] Luce, P. 37.

[14] Norman Stockle, "Study Program for Foreign Language Teachers at Rennes," 67-68 in V.E. Hanzeli and W. D. Lane, editors, New Teachers for New Students: Proceedings of the Seattle Symposium on the Training of Foreign Language Teachers, 1970.

[15] Theodore B. Kalivoda, "An Approach to the Study of Culture in Overseas Programs," Studies in Language Education, Report No. 7, Department of Language Education, University of Georgia, Athens, January, 1974.

[16]Benita H. Berdon, "ACTFL in Arcachon: A Program Description Revisited," Foreign Language Annals, 4 (December, 1970), 184.

[17]Lincoln Canfield, "Evaluation of Summer Schools for American Students and Teachers of Spanish in Mexico and Spain: A Progress Report," Hispania, 57, (March, 1974), 107-39.

[18]It should be noted that four programs operating in Saltillo, Mexico--those of the Instituto de Filogia Hispanica, Instituto de Estudios Iberoamericanos, Universidad Interamericana, Universidad Jaime Balmes-- provided some degree of programming for active use of Spanish through a system of tutors.

[19]Canfield, pp. 120, 125.

[20]Canfield, p. 125.

[21]D. Lincoln Canfield, "Evaluation of Summer Schools for American Students and Teachers of Spanish in Mexico and Spain: Final Report," Hispania, 58 (March, 1975). 158.

[22]Gaarder.

[23]F. André Paquette (ed.), "Guidelines for Teacher Education Programs in Modern Foreign Languages: An Exposition," Modern Language Journal, 50 (October, 1966), 1-103.

[24]John S. Diekhoff, NDEA and Modern Foreign Languages (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1965).